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SUBJECT: GUIDANCE ON OFFICIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH BELARUS

11. (U) Summary. This cable provides guidance for contacts with Belarus officials, with background on the current state of relations between the United States and Belarus.

Representational Contacts

12. (U) In light of the ongoing pressure by Belarus on our embassy personnel, it would not be appropriate to invite government of Belarus representatives to USG representational events or for USG representatives to attend events hosted by or hosted in honor of Belarusian officials, including Belarus national day on July 3 and U.S. Independence Day on July 4. In past years, the Department has not maintained a firm policy on such events, asking posts to use their own discretion. However, it is important that U.S. missions do not send signals to Belarus or to other countries that our relations with Belarus are being conducted on a business as usual basis.

Official Meetings: Selective Engagement

13. (U) Since 1997, the United States has maintained a policy of "selective engagement" with Belarusian leaders: our official contacts with Belarus are commensurate with our policy objectives. Policy-level contacts are infrequent. We do maintain robust contacts with and encourage democratic elements in Belarus, including independent media and non-governmental organizations. Our informal agreement with the EU has been not to meet Belarusian officials at the Cabinet level. In practice, U.S. policy contacts have been at or below the Deputy Assistant Secretary level.

14. (U) In conversations with allies, particularly in Europe, we should reinforce that our selective engagement policy has been successful in marginalizing the Lukashenka regime and demonstrating a cost for its behavior. Belarus has regularly sought senior level contacts with the U.S. and European countries as a way to gain legitimacy both in the eyes of other leaders and in the eyes of the Belarusian public. We have maintained that senior level contacts should only come after Belarus takes significant steps towards easing the atmosphere of repression. Our continued U.S.-EU policy of maintaining official contacts below the ministerial level has been an important public demonstration of the unacceptable nature of Lukashenka's actions. We should also point out that the Lukashenka regime has historically distorted and exploited rare senior level

contacts to claim legitimacy for his regime, without granting any concessions for such contacts.

¶5. (U) We continue to maintain working level engagement on issues of mutual concern, often within the context of international organizations and institutions.

Background on Current Bilateral Relations

¶6. (U) The United States continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Belarus, though these have been severely strained in recent months. Beginning in March 2008, Belarus has expelled or otherwise forced the departure of our Ambassador and all but 5 American diplomats. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has set an upper limit of five American diplomats who can be in country at any time, including temporary duty (TDY) visitors working at the Embassy. Our Locally Engaged Staff (LES) have encountered harassment and threats due to their employment with the U.S. embassy. Recipients of U.S. assistance have also been harassed and threatened with criminal penalties for their activities in support of human rights and democracy, and the state-controlled media has conducted Soviet-style 'exposes' of U.S. activities.

¶7. (U) Belarusian officials have made it clear that they are applying this pressure on our mission to compel a reduction in the sanctions imposed after the fraudulent presidential election of March 2006 and tightened in recent months. In particular, the Belarusian authorities have reacted to sanctions imposed in

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November 2007 on state oil and chemical conglomerate Belneftekhim and to a March 2008 clarification that subsidiaries of Belneftekhim are also subject to the sanctions. These recent measures were taken after Belarus failed to release all political prisoners, including presidential candidate Alyaksandr Kazulin.

¶8. (U) Throughout the diplomatic assault on our embassy, we have told Belarus we are open to a dialogue aimed at improved relations, but have stressed that this dialogue would have to occur in the context of the release of all political prisoners and of concrete and irreversible steps to correct the underlying factors that led to the imposition of sanctions.

¶9. (U) For additional information or guidance on contacts with Belarusian officials, you may contact Joseph Wang, Belarus Desk Officer, at 202-736-4443 or Deputy Director Colleen Hoey in the Office of Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus Affairs at 202-647-9049.

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